

Ear to Asia podcast

Title: The fate of China's many languages

Description: Although Mandarin is the national language of China, it remains incomprehensible to 20% of the population. Beijing is now pushing the use of Mandarin hard among ethnic minorities, but while fluency in the common tongue brings economic benefits, what is the cost to the native languages and identities of those affected? Dr Lewis Mayo and Dr Gerald Roche discuss the state of play for languages in China. Presented by Peter Clarke. An Asia Institute podcast.

Listen: <https://player.whooshkaa.com/episode?id=779423>

Voiceover: The Ear to Asia podcast is made available on the Jakarta Post platform under agreement between the Jakarta Post and the University of Melbourne.

Peter Clarke: Hello, I'm Peter Clarke. This is Ear to Asia.

Lewis Mayo: Certainly Mandarin has been amazingly successful in terms of its growth. But what does happen often when a language has established dominance is that a pushback against it emerges amongst people who feel that they have lost languages that they would like to see recovered.

Gerald Roche: I think that the best chance for the survival of most of China's languages whether that's spoken by the Han majority or the various ethnic minorities is for those communities to feed into international networks of language activism.

Peter Clarke: In this episode, the fate of China's many languages. Ear to Asia is the podcast from Asia Institute, the Asia research specialists at the University of Melbourne.

Peter Clarke: China is hardly alone in having, over its long history, incorporated territories that are home to diverse ethnic groups speaking an array of languages. Mandarin Chinese, or Putonghua is of course the national language, but one that remains incomprehensible to one in five Chinese citizens. Indeed, in some parts of China, only 40% of people are able to make themselves understood in the national tongue.

Peter Clarke: While language policy in the People's Republic was once sensitive and responsive to local conditions, it's now pushing the use of Mandarin hard amongst its non-ethnic Han populations, employing tactics like banning or limiting local languages in schools or in public, or by curtailing media programming in those languages.

Peter Clarke: All too often, Beijing's heavy handed approach to promoting Mandarin has led to anxiety, frustration, and even widespread protest in regions as diverse as Inner Mongolia, Tibet and the far western Xinjiang province. Many non-Han Chinese citizens recognise that fluency in their national language brings

benefits, not least, greater economic opportunity, but at what potential cost to their ethnic identities and at what risk to their local languages?

Peter Clarke: How important is it to maintain linguistic diversity in China? And will it even be possible as Beijing ramps up its policy of active assimilation? With us to discuss the state of play for languages in the People's Republic of China and the ethnicities they're tied to are Asia historian, Dr. Lewis Mayo from Asia Institute and Dr. Gerald Roche, a scholar of language politics from La Trobe University. Lewis and Gerald, welcome back to Ear to Asia.

Gerald Roche: Hi, Peter.

Lewis Mayo: Hello, Peter.

Peter Clarke: It's great to have you here with us again. I think before we delve into some of those things I just foreshadowed in the introduction, let's talk about Mandarin because that's going to sit right at the centre of our discussion. So Lewis, let's start the ball rolling with you. What is the Mandarin language actually? And then of course, is it truly a national language?

Lewis Mayo: Mandarin is a complicated phenomenon because the word Mandarin, to refer to the national standard language of the People's Republic of China, is only one of the uses of that English word Mandarin to describe Chinese languages. So standard Mandarin is a language originally spoken by a very small number of people, think about standard BBC English, how many people even in the British Isles actually speak language natively? Most don't.

Lewis Mayo: But on the other hand, it's been the broadcast standard that's been aspired to by people in the United Kingdom for a very, very long time. If we thought about that situation with the larger family of English and standard British English, we could say that standard school Mandarin is something like that. Mandarin also refers to a family of Chinese languages, Chinese dialects, and we can think of it as being a bit like the way English fits in with the larger Germanic family.

Lewis Mayo: So if you thought of English has close relatives, it's things like Dutch, Frisian languages that are quite difficult often to understand without study. And the larger family of Mandarin dialects is spread across a large part of China. If we thought about the larger family of Chinese languages, and of course that would include the Mandarin family in relationship to languages such as Cantonese, Hokkien, the language of Shanghai, then you are thinking about the whole family say of Germanic languages, which might include Swedish, Bavarian, Faroese, Icelandic, et cetera.

Lewis Mayo: As you would know, a native English speaker cannot learn Swedish simply by sitting there. You have to take a class in it. The same sorts of issues would be there for the difference between say Cantonese and standard Mandarin. That said, Chinese has another distinctive feature, which is a little bit difficult for native speakers of English to understand, which is that there is a standard written language which is uniform that can be read out, if you like, in all of these languages.

- Lewis Mayo: So you can read a standard text in written Chinese in a Cantonese pronunciation, in a Hokkien pronunciation, Shanghai pronunciation, Sichuan Mandarin pronunciation, and they would in some cases be so different that a native speaker of Mandarin would not understand a text read aloud using the Cantonese pronunciation. And we don't really have a comparable situation in English with all of that.
- Lewis Mayo: So the story of standard Mandarin, if I can just finish here, is the promulgation of the Beijing pronunciation of standard, modern Chinese with Mandarin grammar. And that's the language that's promoted across the country as the standard language that everyone has spoken. Xi Jinping is one of the first leaders of China in the modern era to be a native speaker of Beijing Mandarin.
- Lewis Mayo: Chairman Mao, Mao Zedong could not speak standard Chinese. Deng Xiaoping, his successor, spoke a Sichuan inflected Mandarin that was so difficult for his fellow Chinese to understand that his daughter used to have to interpret for him. This is an indication of in a sense what the larger language situation is like in China relating to Mandarin.
- Peter Clarke: Lewis, you just alluded to the character system. Is it fair to say that the character system, the written version of the language actually enhances pluralism rather than suppresses pluralism?
- Lewis Mayo: With standard written Chinese, yes, indeed it is possible for people in different areas to read that language entirely in their own pronunciation. And indeed that's... if you think of Chairman Mao was not intelligible to a great many people in China, nonetheless was a fluent writer of the standard language and was able to use that writing as a tool of unification within the whole country.
- Lewis Mayo: Now, if you're also thinking about it, the story of Mandarin is also about the spread of broadcasting and the spread of electricity. If you think of China a hundred years ago, electricity is limited to a very, very small part of the country. And that means that most people in China, overwhelmingly 90 something percent, would never have heard anything like what we think of the standard Mandarin in the present.
- Lewis Mayo: So it's with the spread of electricity and particularly with the spread of radio and later on with the spread of television and finally, with the spread of mobile phones where people use the Latin script as the inputting method for producing Chinese characters, that's when standard Mandarin basically takes off.
- Lewis Mayo: So you've gone from a situation where a hundred years ago, the number of people that could speak standard Mandarin was probably limited essentially to the population of Beijing, to the situation where standard Mandarin is now the most widely spoken language on earth. So that's a really massive change in the course of a century. And it's a change that goes hand in hand with the story of modern Chinese nationalism and the modern Chinese revolution.

- Peter Clarke: But Gerald, I want to pursue that question, whether it is truly on the ground, a national language. Even to my untutored ear, when I spent some time in Chongqing in Sichuan and heard the language there then spent some time in Beijing, the two versions to me were markedly different. And just picking up on what Lewis was saying there, as we discuss its connections to nationalism and cohesion, is it truly practically a national language?
- Gerald Roche: It's important to realise that the level of people in the People's Republic of China speaking the national language, Mandarin, did not reach over half the population until 2007. So 2007, there were national surveys showing that 53% of the population had some competence in the national language. And we don't even really know what that level of competence is.
- Gerald Roche: So it might just be that they had passive understanding of what they heard, it might mean that they could read a simple text or have a simple dialogue, we don't really know. But the fact that that was as recently as 2007, tells us something very important about the history of language standardisation and national languages in China. That level has really risen quite quickly since 2007. So by 2015, it hit 70% and it was targeted to reach 80% by this year.
- Gerald Roche: That expansion of the national standard language has primarily and initially affected Han Chinese people. So when we talk about language politics in China, there's often a tendency to set up this distinction between the Han majority and the minorities and the language of the majority being imposed on the minority. There's that large aspect of truth to that distinction.
- Gerald Roche: But we also have to think about the fact that this national standard language has also been imposed on the Han majority and displaced their languages as well. And those include varieties of Mandarin. So where I lived in China in Qinghai province, there's a very distinctive form of Mandarin Chinese spoken there, it's been heavily influenced by other languages in that region, including Tibetan.
- Gerald Roche: It is basically incomprehensible to someone who only speaks Beijing Mandarin. And that language now is in the process of being replaced basically by the national standard language. So I think that that's something important to emphasise, is that the Han majority of China are also in a large sense victims of these language politics and policies that promote the national language at the expense of basically every other form of communication in the country.
- Peter Clarke: If we take an example, let's take the template from China and overlay it across the European continent. You think of all the different languages and some of them quite related within the European continent, is that what we are sort of looking at in China as well, continental China, that we've got a real mosaic, haven't we?
- Gerald Roche: So I would say the continental scale of Europe is the correct sort of comparison to be making, that the extent of diversity, the level of complexity in terms of the relationships amongst the languages is more similar to Europe as a whole than to any one country in Europe. And so I

think we often incorrectly make comparisons to say, well, let's think about China as if it is France, or let's think about China as if it is Germany.

Gerald Roche: So if we use that continent level comparison, what we actually see is something of the following kind, where if we took all of the Germanic languages, so Swedish, English, German, for example, and then said that they were all actually a single Germanic language and that English and German and Swedish were just dialects of that language, we get the sense of what is happening in the way that languages are classified and discussed in China and the way that policy is made for them, right?

Gerald Roche: So essentially what we would see is if we applied the Chinese policies to Europe, is that we'd see all of these language families lumped together to make a single language, a Germanic language, a romance language for French and Italian and Spanish and so on, and then we would see on top of that, the imposition of a Europe-wide language that was derived from one of those families, but was essentially an artificial, new invented language.

Peter Clarke: Gerald, let's clarify all this by going through a real life, quite recent, a contemporary situation, a contemporary case study. Inner Mongolia earlier this year, as you've written about and as we know, ethnic Mongolian parents in the Inner Mongolian autonomous region of China were protesting about changes to the language education policy, the way schools are conducted, what language they use.

Peter Clarke: Take us through some of the tension points and the fault lines. And it's quite recent. And it was, from what I've read anyway, quite rapid. It was a very sudden imposition of a newer policy. Take us through just the essential elements of what happened in Inner Mongolia.

Gerald Roche: Basically what happened is that students returned to school after the summer vacation in Inner Mongolia to find that some of their core textbooks had been replaced. The textbooks that had been brought in to replace their previous textbooks were national level textbooks, as opposed to locally specific textbooks.

Gerald Roche: And they had shifted the medium of those textbooks from Mongolian to Mandarin, to Chinese, and also shifted the medium of instruction for those classes from Mongolian to Mandarin. They'd also made a number of other minor and seemingly trivial changes to the textbooks, things like minor tweaks on the imagery, so to de-ethnicize the imagery.

Gerald Roche: So what happened after people noticed these changes had been made was that there were protests against the decisions. The protests were mostly peaceful and passive. So the most widespread form of protest was that people withheld their children from schools. They simply refused to send them back. There was also a number of petitions that were being circulated and signed and submitted to local educational authorities, to school authorities, and so on.

- Gerald Roche: There was push back against these changes and there were strong expressions of these changes being part of a larger programme. So a larger programme, on the one hand that has over the last 50 to 70 years constantly undermined the position, the use, the transmission of Mongolian language and in Inner Mongolia, but also part of a broader programme, which is seeing the national language encroaching on and replacing minority languages like Tibetan and the Uyghur language.
- Lewis Mayo: To just clarify, so the Mongolian language and the Chinese languages belong in different language families. They're not related. The questions about, say for instance, language standardisation across the Mandarin family in relationship to other Chinese languages like Cantonese is a slightly different one from that in relationship to the question in Inner Mongolia.
- Lewis Mayo: Now in Inner Mongolia, you have a mixed population, some of whom are ethnic Mongolians. They form a minority in the area, the majority of whom ethnic Han Chinese. Most ethnic Mongolians speak, these days a slight majority of them speak and are educated in Mandarin Chinese, but a significant minority is Mongolian speaking and Mongolian educated.
- Lewis Mayo: Now, as Gerald explained, what was the policy in China from basically the foundation of the People's Republic of China was that designated minority languages were instituted as languages of education and languages of literacy so that in the Mongolian area, traditionally, people could choose to be educated primarily in Mongolian and you would get your education in Mongolian, purely in Mongolian from your primary schooling all the way up until your university potentially.
- Lewis Mayo: And Mandarin Chinese was a secondary, additional language that was used in that system. So the core curriculum that was traditionally taught were literature, Mongolian literature, history, and what we call civics basically. Because these things were up until this year in Mongolian schools, those subjects were all taught in Mongolian.
- Lewis Mayo: What happened with the change in policy was the decision was to say those core subjects will be now taught in Chinese, in standard Mandarin and Mongolian will be a secondary subject, essentially as Mongolian language activists have argued something like a foreign language, it would have an hour a day. So the pushback was from those Mongolians in the system who are dedicated to Mongolian language as the core language of instruction in the Mongolian areas and to the erosion of this in this situation.
- Lewis Mayo: And this is significant because one of the differences between the communists and the Chinese nationalists whom they replaced was that in their constitutional provisions for the state that they established, the idea of ethnic autonomy and ethnic cultural rights, including the right to education was firmly established. The idea officially was that the People's Republic of China was a multi-ethnic state.
- Lewis Mayo: It's significant that for instance, Mandarin is referred to in Chinese as Putonghua, the language of common communication. So rather than saying

that China was in a sense, a Han state, it was simply that Mandarin was the medium of common interaction. This was directly modelled on the Soviet Union where the same argument was made about Russian.

Lewis Mayo: That the Soviet Union was a non-national, multinational state, supposedly, with Russian being established as the means by which all of the ethnic groups, all of the nationalities, all of the Soviet peoples could communicate with each other in. And officially in the early years of the People's Republic of China, this was what Mandarin was supposed to be, a language of common communication so that when ethnic minorities and ethnic majorities interacted, Mandarin is what they would use. So what we've seen in the recent period, most notably in Inner Mongolia just recently is a change to that longstanding policy.

Peter Clarke: Gerald, very briefly, the whole issue of literacy. Earlier on, we heard that the very complex Chinese script system, the characters, would perhaps aid pluralism. But there are sorts of choices to be made by all speakers of the various languages in terms of their literacy. Isn't that a central choice as well?

Gerald Roche: So the state justifies the promotion of written Chinese and spoken Chinese, essentially as a form of economic advancement and integration, that if you learn Mandarin, you learn to read Chinese, it will help you get ahead. But actually what is happening or what could be argued is causing the economic disadvantage is the failure to integrate those minority languages like written Mongolian, written Tibetan and so on into the economy, right?

Gerald Roche: So if there are jobs that use those languages, if those languages are used in business and so on, then knowing those languages is economically useful. So this issue of literacy and what's the best language for people to learn, it's really deeply connected with the economic role that those languages are given to play by the state.

Peter Clarke: Gerald, what's actually in the black letter law of the People's Republic of China's constitution regarding minorities?

Gerald Roche: The constitution of the People's Republic of China provides the freedom for all minorities to use and develop their languages. Now, this sounds very good on paper, but one of the problems is that the enforcement of that constitutional freedom is actually provided in laws that have much weaker wording.

Gerald Roche: So they say essentially that the use of these languages is encouraged but optional. So we go from very strong freedoms in the constitution to a legal system that provides optional use to those languages. And when we get to the level of implementation, it's rarely enforced and it becomes even further watered down.

Gerald Roche: So we have those three stages from a very strongly word, the constitution, weak laws to very lacklustre implementation. But the second problem that's embedded in the constitution has more to do with what it doesn't say rather

than what it does say. By that, I mean that the constitution doesn't really specify which languages they are talking about.

Gerald Roche: So if we go back to the fact that Lewis and I were talking about earlier, which is that you have this enormous linguistic diversity but very limited recognition of that diversity, that plays out from the constitution through this assumption that certain languages are languages and other languages are assumed to just be dialects or lingos or jargons or varieties and they don't actually need to be supported.

Gerald Roche: So across all of China, between the ethnic minorities and the Han majority, you have this distinction between recognised languages and unrecognised languages. And this is really important because those unrecognised languages have no legal claim to any kind of status, they have no claim to be used in the education system, and so on. They're just absolutely abandoned by the state.

Gerald Roche: Those recognised languages like Mongolian, like Tibetan and like Uyghur, and so on are always subordinated to the national language. They're always relatively underfunded, relatively underused, relatively excluded and so on. So despite the nice wording of the constitution as a legal system for providing protections for languages, it's actually fairly dysfunctional.

Peter Clarke: You're listening to Ear to Asia from Asia Institute at the University of Melbourne. And just a reminder to listeners about Asia Institute's online publication on Asia and its societies, politics and cultures, it's called the Melbourne Asia Review. It's free to read and it's open access at melbourneasiareview.edu.au. You'll find articles by some of our regular Ear to Asia guests and by many others.

Peter Clarke: Plus, you can catch recent episodes of Ear to Asia at the Melbourne Asia Review website, which again, you can find at melbourneasiareview.edu.au. I'm Peter Clarke with guests Dr. Gerald Roche and Dr. Lewis Mayo. And we're discussing the fate of minority languages in China, and increasing pressure from Beijing to unify around Mandarin. Gerald, perhaps there's a bit of slight upper hand linguistically here as well. Tell us about this word minzu and what role it plays.

Gerald Roche: The minzu system is the way that the population of China is organised and classified. It has its roots in European nationalism, essentially. It was fed through to China via Russia and Japan, but it really comes out of Europe. And we can think of minzu as being in some ways like a nation or a people. So the idea that you have the German nation, the German people and the German language.

Gerald Roche: And this is reproduced within China, the idea that China is made up of 56 minzu is essentially a way of saying that it's made up of 56 nations. So a nice description of this system is to call China an empire of nations rather than just being a country or a nation state. It's an empire of nations, 56 nations. So each of those 56 nations is supposed to have its one single language in

theory, despite the fact that in practise, all of those minzu, each of those nations is actually multilingual.

Gerald Roche: So if you take the case of the Tibetan example where I've done my research, the Tibetan people, the Tibetan minzu supposed to have a single Tibetan language, but you have a number of layers of diversity. You have the written language, which is centralised and standardised, you have spoken varieties of Tibetan, which are very diverse and mutually unintelligible, and then you also have a group of languages that are spoken by Tibetan, but are not classified as Tibetan type languages.

Gerald Roche: And if you add up all of that diversity, you get somewhere around 45 to 50 separate languages, which are spoken by Tibetans. So if you apply those principles of recognised and unrecognised languages and their relation to the national language, what you have is that all Tibetans have to learn their national language, they're given the option to learn Tibetan as a single standardised language, but often the language that they speak at home and that they're most comfortable in is a completely different language altogether, it's an unrecognised language.

Peter Clarke: Lewis, by implication we're actually talking about second generation ethnic policy in the People's Republic of China. What was the first generation ethnic policy and what's changed with the second one?

Lewis Mayo: So I did mention earlier that the People's Republic of China was founded on an essentially Soviet idea of ethnic rights and that it contrasted itself with the nationalist regime, which it displaced on the grounds that it was an opponent of Han chauvinism. And to just clarify, all Han people, all speakers of Chinese languages are classified as belonging to one ethnic group.

Lewis Mayo: So you have one massive Han group, and there are various Chinese languages within that group. So the original idea with the ethnic policy was to protect this diversity and to follow a Soviet model of working class solidarity, supposedly, that the poor peoples of the Chinese nation were all United together by their socialist commitments and that they were entitled to ethnic self-determination.

Lewis Mayo: Particularly after the breakup of the Soviet Union, and I think even more significantly, the fragmentation of the former Yugoslavia, events that happened after the communist party consolidated its control through the Tiananmen crackdown, you got an enormous anxiety on the part of the ruling elite about the possibility of the breakup of the Chinese state.

Lewis Mayo: And so for most of the last 30 to 40 years, there has been a strong sense on the part of the Han Chinese communist governing group, and indeed a substantial part of the Han Chinese middle-class, that China's unity is threatened, and that the threats to this unity come in part from secessionist movements backed by foreigners, of which the most significant, the movement in Tibet associated with the Lama's church and the Dalai Lama's government in exile and the Xinjiang Turkic Muslim group, which is held to be naturally inclined to friendship with the other peoples of China, but

alienated from them as a result of Islamic fundamentalism and foreign intervention, particularly by rival powers such as the United States.

Lewis Mayo: So it's that larger context of fear of fragmentation, plus the sense that you need to know Mandarin Chinese to get ahead. Everyone needs to get ahead. The problem with minorities is that they aren't participating properly in the expansion of their economic potential, and that these are the things that the new policies of the promotion of Mandarin are targeted at.

Peter Clarke: And Gerald, just to put a finer point on it, we have seen a progressive non-recognition of ethnic minorities over that period, haven't we within this process?

Gerald Roche: So I would say that the non-recognition of minority languages has been fairly stable. And what the second generation ethnic policies aim to do in part is to extend that regime of non-recognition to the minorities that are currently recognised. So it basically says that we have this system of recognition and protections for ethnic minorities, and we don't need to have it. It's encourages separatism, it encourages social divisions and so on, and we're going to get rid of it.

Gerald Roche: That's kind of the way that I think about the second generation ethnic policies, is that it's really taking the model that China already applies to most of its languages and applying it to the larger recognised languages. And just to also extend a bit on what Lewis was saying, this idea that the second generation ethnic policies is designed to combat separatism and disintegrationism I think is absolutely correct.

Gerald Roche: But I think that there's also a sense amongst these policymakers that countries like the USA, countries like Australia didn't follow this mode of recognition of giving rights to minorities, of giving them education in their own language. And there's a sense of that, well, if everyone else has been doing it, why can't we? And this is kind of in some ways modelled on the way that climate policy often gets talked about, right? That we're trying to put pressure on China to decarbonize and so on.

Gerald Roche: And the reply historically had been, until recently had been, well, you had your chance to develop, you had your chance to pollute, why can't we? Why can't we have that as well? And we can think of this as an application of those kinds of arguments to the field of comparative colonialism.

Lewis Mayo: We also need to contextualise this in the death of the communist party's commitment to communist radicalism, and particularly to the idea of it being a working class revolutionary party. And given that the party doesn't essentially subscribe to Marxist doctrine in anything, but a highly diluted form, emphasis on national unity and on national strength and on national pride carries enormous weight because that's the ideological glue that is used to stick everything together.

Lewis Mayo: So once you've gone away from the idea of a revolutionary country based on class struggle, and you've put national unification at the centre, then

anything that suggests that national unity is under threat is to be opposed. And you can say that there's a strong analogy with the conservative positions of English only, or English majority politics in both the United States and Australia.

Lewis Mayo: So people that don't like the expansion of Spanish in the United States have a kind of mindset that's remarkably similar to that of the proponents of Mandarin only in the People's Republic of China. And it's the same type of politics, I would say, a conservative nationalist politics that tries to avoid issues of class struggle.

Peter Clarke: Lewis, take us to the Xinjiang province, you're very familiar with that part of the world, and the Uyghurs and the suppression of them generally. But what's the linguistic aspect of that suppression?

Lewis Mayo: So Uyghur language is one of a number of Turkic languages, it's closely related to the Uzbek language spoken in Uzbekistan. Turkic languages originate in what's, it's thought by scholars, what's now Mongolia and they spread westwards arriving in Western Europe in Turkey. So they are languages that are notable for their pluralism in their vocabulary.

Lewis Mayo: So the Uyghur language has lone words from Russian, from Persian, from Chinese. They use an Arabic script at the moment, a reformed variety of Arabic script. There've been a lot of different policies on the Uyghur script over the years, so standard Latin variety that's used in everyday communications, and it's been written in Cyrillic as well, so as the Uzbek language is.

Lewis Mayo: So what you have with that language of course, is a high degree of difference from modern standard Chinese, noticeable in the very large number of European language words derived from Russian, because of course Xinjiang was highly influenced by the Russians in the Soviet period and even earlier. So it's a language which I guess has on the surface very little that would link it to Chinese as a language imagined in terms of its script.

Lewis Mayo: So there's a strong sense of difference, I suppose, on the part of speakers of Uyghur and speakers of Chinese. So the Chinese state has interestingly shown a lot of reserve about the Arabic script in recent times. For instance, in an attempt to sinify Chinese-speaking Muslim restaurants, it's been ordered that Arabic words such as those designating that food is halal be removed from signage. And we're talking in that case, not simply about a different language group as is the case of the Uyghurs, but simply with public representations of non-Chinese script in language.

Lewis Mayo: And now in terms of the actual politics of the language, one of the things that is striking, I guess, is the difference between those people who have historically been, in a sense full users of Uyghur in all parts of life against those in parts of Xinjiang where Uyghur coexists with Chinese. And you have, I guess, tensions between the areas, particularly in Southern Xinjiang

which have been targeted in the recent past for the bilingual education programme that's recently been brought in Mongolia.

Lewis Mayo: So the Inner Mongolian situation is actually a copy of strategies used earlier in Xinjiang, where there is the added concern with Uyghur separatism and Islamic terrorism, and the idea that if you can just teach Uyghurs more Chinese, they will become less disaffected and less prone to be influenced by the propaganda of Al-Qaeda. These are the assumptions that are behind the system. So it is a very tense situation over language issues in Xinjiang because of its connection to the larger political issues that are in that part of China.

Gerald Roche: The other really important thing that's happening in Xinjiang in relation to language in recent years is the way that language education is essentially part of the justification for sending people into mass internment systems, where citizens are interned on mass without having committed any specific crime generally, primarily on the basis of their identity, right?

Gerald Roche: So people are concentrated in these camps, which the euphemism that's used is they're re-education camps. And often they actually really primarily serve this purpose. So people are locked up primarily because they don't know Mandarin, they're sent there to learn Mandarin. And this is assumed to be for their economic benefit as well as for their political integration into the country.

Gerald Roche: So we have reports of the classrooms of people sitting and repeating phrases, doing rote learning of modern standard Chinese and modern standard Mandarin as part of their life in the camps. So it's both the reason why they're sent there and one of the major activities that they are partake in while they're in these places.

Lewis Mayo: A lot of thinking about the relationship between Uyghur and Chinese in terms of economic progress and the integration of the Xinjiang region into the larger Chinese economic structure dates from the 2008 Ürümqi riots when there was ethnic violence between Uyghur and Chinese.

Lewis Mayo: And some research on that suggested that it was Uyghur educated merchants in particular, frustrated by the obstacles to them within the Chinese economic system that resulted from the fact that a Uyghur language education did not permit them the kinds of economic opportunities that those who know Chinese have. These are complicated and interesting issues.

Lewis Mayo: Uyghur people are very, very worried about the future of the Uyghur language, whether it will survive this incredible pressure. My estimation is that the circumstances that Gerald is describing will be like any bad language class, just produce incompetent and alienated speakers, who at best probably arrive with a sort of form of ghetto Chinese that they use to express their dislike for the system.

- Peter Clarke: And Lewis, let's do our final look at a particular case study, Hong Kong. We're all aware of course, just from the news alone, how roiled things are in Hong Kong at the moment. But there's been a debate about whether Cantonese is a dialect or a language, that's part of the debate. What's the political significance of that debate and what can we expect from Beijing going forward now regarding Cantonese?
- Lewis Mayo: This is an interesting question because the ethnic designation of the people of Hong Kong is that they are Han Chinese. And the word *minzu* that was used earlier to refer to an ethnicity, a nation or something more like the German word *volk* or the Russian *naroda*, basically a people. It's been the case just recently that some of the more extreme groups of Hong Kong autonomy and even independence activists have argued that the Hong Kong people are a nation.
- Lewis Mayo: Now, given that New Zealanders and Australians are separate nations, we are nations, but we have a common language of Australasian English with two different varieties, the New Zealand version and the Australian version. You can say that, well, of course from our point of view, language is not what defines a nation.
- Lewis Mayo: But in Hong Kong, which as a result of the British acquisition of Qing territory after the first opium war developed without direct interference from either the Qing dynasty government, which was the government of the last imperial dynasty in China that fell in 1911, after 1911 of either of the revolutionary regimes in China.
- Lewis Mayo: So the Cantonese language, which is as difficult to understand for a person coming in from the outside who speaks Mandarin as Dutch is for an English speaker. I had a teacher of Mandarin in New Zealand back in the 1980s who had lived in Hong Kong for 20 years and was unable to speak Cantonese. So in other words, that's the sense of practical difference between these two things.
- Lewis Mayo: Cantonese, of course, is spoken not just in Hong Kong, but in Macau, in the adjacent areas in Guangdong province and in the city of Canton. And of course, throughout Southeast Asia, spoken in the United States, spoken in New Zealand, it's one of the great languages of our region. But historically it has been designated a variety of Chinese. And it has been, I suppose, a factor in the tensions between the Hong Kong populace and the government of Beijing, is that the sense of identification with the Cantonese language as the language of Hong Kong identity has been very strong.
- Lewis Mayo: It's interesting that the Beijing government was active in trying to reduce the use of Cantonese within the territories of the PRC itself, leading to some protests. But by and large, the same sorts of policies that we've been discussing in this talk so far were applied to Cantonese, which is namely the reduction of the number of broadcasts in the language, except for ornamental purposes with the idea that well, what needs to be spread is Mandarin.

Lewis Mayo: Mandarin education has been unpopular in Hong Kong, and a sense of Cantonese as the essence of Hong Kong identity is very, very strong. And of course, Hong Kong culture, particularly through the Hong Kong entertainment industry has an exceptionally rich engagement with the Cantonese language. And anyone who knows that language and knows Hong Kong culture knows how important it is to Hong Kong identity.

Lewis Mayo: I hope this doesn't add too much extra complexity, but if we compare Hong Kong and Singapore, it's noticeable that whereas English and in particular, Singlish, the modified form of English spoken on an everyday basis in Singapore was an everyday language in Singapore and remains so to this day, whereas English never became an everyday element of Hong Kong life.

Lewis Mayo: The everyday language for people socialising, their discussion of political issues was Cantonese. And so the conflict between the populace of Hong Kong and the government in Beijing is an interesting mixture of, I suppose, political issues, pushing people in the direction of a stronger sense of linguistic identity. And on the other hand, a strong sense of linguistic difference from the mainland helping to exacerbate areas of political tension. And so that's really what's happening in the Hong Kong setting as I see it.

Peter Clarke: So Lewis, what is going to happen to Cantonese? But broaden this out beyond that, that's a very particular case. What's going to happen to minority languages generally in the People's Republic of China? And a question we haven't actually asked ourselves very sharply yet, does it really matter if it eventually resulted a monoculture within that republic?

Lewis Mayo: Well, it's interesting to look at cases where language shift has occurred, and certainly Mandarin is an extremely successful language in terms of its spread. It's been amazingly successful in terms of its growth. It's spoken by tens of millions more people even in the last decade than it was in the decade before. So it's grown and grown and grown.

Lewis Mayo: But what does happen often when a language basically has established dominance, is that a kind of pushback against it emerges amongst people who feel that they have lost languages that they would like to see recovered. And I mean, a very good example of that is te reo Māori in New Zealand, the Māori language there.

Lewis Mayo: But another one actually in a Mandarin speaking setting is the Taiwan Hokkien, Taiwanese language in Taiwan, which many younger speakers have difficulty in communicating with. Many of them have also come to feel that, well, that's an essential part of what their identity is.

Lewis Mayo: So even though Mandarin is so strong, it does in many cases produce this counteraction, particularly as it consolidates itself. And it may well be that some of those most active in the areas of language preservation, language revitalization, and language activism are people who have in fact shifted in the direction of another language.

Gerald Roche: What I might do is just jump on that point that you were talking about Lewis about this kind of backlash that occurs when the language sort of rises to a certain point of dominance and these phenomenons of language revitalization, language maintenance, language activism, and so on that occur.

Gerald Roche: If we circle back just very briefly to the case of Hong Kong and Cantonese and Guangdong, and so on, there was an interesting situation back in 2010, I think it was, where there were some measures put on the Cantonese language to limit its use in media. And there were large protests against that. Some Tibetan intellectuals saw what was happening and began talking about this in social media, in the Tibetan blogosphere and so on. And there was an essay published which had a title, something along the lines of like, what if Tibetans took to the street in defence of their language?

Gerald Roche: And then that's exactly what happened a few months later when Tibetans in Qinghai province returned to school from their summer holidays, saw that their textbooks had been changed and there was mass protests on the street and the government rolled back the decision, right? So we see these loops, networks between different language activism movements.

Gerald Roche: I think that probably the best chance for the survival of most of China's languages, whether that's spoken by the Han majority or the various so-called ethnic minorities is for those communities to feed into international networks of language activism. And I really think that an important opportunity for this will be the upcoming UNESCO's one to International Decade of Indigenous Languages, which will take place from 2022 until 2032.

Gerald Roche: So one of the barriers to this being taken up in China at present is the fact that the minzu system is essentially a way of refusing to recognise that China has indigenous people and that it has indigenous languages. In fact, I think it's absolutely correct to say that China has indigenous people and that it has indigenous languages. And hopefully the Decade of Indigenous Languages will be an opportunity for indigenous peoples in China to link their language activism into movements around the world for language revitalization.

Peter Clarke: Gerald, Lewis, a fascinating discussion. Thanks so much for being with us on Ear to Asia.

Gerald Roche: Thanks very much, Peter.

Lewis Mayo: Thank you, Peter.

Peter Clarke: Our guest this time on Ear to Asia, Dr. Lewis Mayo from the University of Melbourne's Asia Institute and Dr. Gerald Roche from La Trobe University. Ear to Asia is brought to you by Asia Institute. You can find more information about this and all our other episodes at the Asia Institute website. Be sure to keep up with every episode of Ear to Asia by following us on the Apple Podcast app, Stitcher, Spotify, or SoundCloud.

Peter Clarke:

If you like the show, please rate and review it on Apple Podcasts. Every positive review helps new listeners find the show. And you can help us by spreading the word on social media. This episode was recorded on the 1st of December 2020. Producers were Kelvin Param and Eric van Bommel of profactual.com. Ear to Asia is licenced under Creative Commons, copyright 2021, the University of Melbourne. I'm Peter Clarke. Thanks for your company.